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Falling seeds, flowing light

Abstract

Albert Park seemed twice-lit in a glazing December sun. From beneath the gaze of the lonely New Zealand soldier who commemorates our participation in a dark, best-forgotten war, I watched a thin, grey-haired man who stood in the space before the statue of Sir George Grey arguing with a small cluster of noonhour idlers. He spoke to them with an ungiving, flinty conviction that both intrigued and angered them. In his hands he held a cone-shaped framework of copperwire which he thrust towards his audience, jerking it back again and then bobbing it above his head. The contrivance suggested the veined stretch of a bat's wings as bits of goldfoil fastened to the intersections of the wires flashed sharply in the sunlight.

Fallings Seeds, Flowing Light

*The eye could not see the sun
were it not a part of it.*

Plotinus

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Sir George Grey may never have been witness to anything as evidently mad as the spiel that was being given that loafing noon. I caught something about light and the affinities of light-filled beings for each other but the drift of the argument was too abstract, too formidably queer, to grasp at once. And there were jeers to contend with, hurled questions (that fell like stones plopping upon snow) which increased the difficulties of understanding the speaker. When I did manage to pick up what he was saying, I felt momentarily stunned. In habitual, unthoughtful Auckland of the middle Sixties, he was advancing a complete cosmological theory that, in its assuredness, simplicity and archaic wholeness, might have rivalled Anaximander's vision of primal boundlessness.

I recognized the speaker, abruptly, like seeing a familiar place through different light. He was thinner, more evenly grey and bent, but I couldn't mistake the taut, inward herbalist whom I had known briefly six years before when we had both worked for a touring Australian circus. Against all odds, he had sprinkled that catch-penny show with some

peculiar spoors, and some had managed to grow a bit. A few still clung to my own mind even as I stood in Albert Park six years later.

Whale Cock (Greg Epperson's giant Maori tentboss) had been the first to see the van. Whooping above the din of the tentsite, he had given a ripping shout that forced us to drop our tasks and look where he was pointing. There, straight ahead through the marquee, parked between the ticket-office and the Hoop-la, a small, bizarre truck had stopped. Even from the interior of the Big Top we could see that it was top-heavy with a clumsy, purple body. A horn beeped erratically. No one answered, and it beeped impatiently a few more times. After a moment, Whale Cock, tired of putting up the heavy wooden stands, led the way out through the clutter of planks, wires and equipment. Fisheyes, Sunshine, the Ding and some other tenthands followed him outside. Attention shifted quickly from the work of setting-up; then, the rest of us shuffled into the blunt afternoon.

Dark purple-red, bordered with nauseous green, the garishly fresh paint of the van hinted at a recent attempt to restore the ungainly, clinkerbuilt shell to Showbusiness startlingness. There was a single sign painted along the side of the van in the same bile-green as the edges.

Roger Wodebith
Herbalist

'What does it say?' Fisheyes had wondered. As puzzled as if some bushed crusader (with hooded gerfalcon) had reined up before me, I couldn't answer.

A pale man with grizzled hair stared through the windscreen at the gathering ring of circusfolk. His eyes blinked behind thick, square glasses. When he opened the van's door, we could see that he was slightly built, drooping within a bright yellow shirt, a checkered lemon and leafgreen scarf tied loosely around his neck. He glanced about, appalled (I supposed), at our rough, dishevelled looks. He peered beyond us to the gear-jumbled tentsite as if trying to take it all in at once. 'May I speak with Greg Epperson, please?' he asked finally. With comic formality edging his uncertainty, he added, 'He's expecting me. Before tea.'

Wodebith was never welcomed formally. He simply found a place for his little rig near the end of the string of trucks and caravans. He hung out an awning from the tailgate and settled in. Later, when Whale Cock and the Circus' groom came over to have a yarn, he was sitting in the shade of his awning sorting bottles and jotting into a notebook. We all became familiar with Wodebith's bottles and notebooks. They puzzled us

all, but we knew that with a circus the most aggressive riddles are usually outside the performances.

Toward tea on his first day, I saw Wodebith stroll over to Major Fultz's bus. He must have picked up some idea of what he was supposed to do from the animal trainer since it was at least a day before Greg bothered to speak to him. That very night he replaced Fisheyes in helping to look after the menagerie and the freakshow. He stood in front of the frowzy tent where Greg's misshapen beasts were exhibited, calling in a muted voice to the locals who passed along the tiny midway. With one of the monkeys perched upon his shoulders, wearing Circus coveralls with EPPERSON stitched in blue across the back, he looked as if he had always been there.

I never did learn what had attracted Wodebith to Epperson's Circus or what role Greg had envisioned for him. A herbalist doesn't have an act and there is little chance for him to sell his remedies. Things move too quickly: the crowds gush singlemindedly through the marquee, the acts themselves blur in the splashy lights. So there was a pointlessness about Wodebith's presence. He would help set up the little tents for the midway and he looked after the freakshow in the late afternoons and evenings. Yet, since these were anyone's tasks, it was evident that Greg hadn't needed him. The truth was probably that Greg had hired Wodebith without knowing in the least what to do with him. Greg never refused anyone who wanted to join, hand, performer or drifting eccentric. It was a weakness that had caused him perplexity more than once. Wodebith, following some obscure motivation, had asked to join and Greg, always on the lookout for novelty, had let him come.

Wodebith swiftly worked himself into the life of the Circus. We became accustomed to the sight of the bizarre van and the vivid shirts he wore. When he was not working, he spent most of his time around his van sorting odd lots of bottles and tins. Two or three times I saw him reading in dog-eared books and making notes in a pocket-sized ledger. In his first few days with Epperson's Circus, he was quiet and, had it not been for the oddness of his van and an aggressively open aversion to eating meat, he might have gone largely unnoticed. A circus absorbs eccentricities readily.

Except for the groom, Whale Cock and Major Fultz, the animal trainer, Wodebith spoke to no one unless it was necessary. He liked to play with the Major's monkeys and to feed the cockatoos whose cages crowded around the performers' caravans. Once I saw him down on one knee crooning softly to the pathetic falcon that Greg kept within a tight, wingsqueezing cage. Often he would merely stand quietly along the

midway while monkeys climbed over him. Above everything else in the shifting geometry of the Circus, Wodebith seemed drawn toward Greg's scarecrow menagerie.

This (known, with raw accuracy, as the doghouse) was a flat semi, painted the basic inkblue and orange of the Circus, upon which were stacked the untidy cages of all the animals Greg carried to entice the locals. Wodebith could be seen walking slowly round the menagerie, bent slightly forward, his eyes intent from behind his goggle-like glasses, while the monkeys, so many affectionate kiddies, clutched his legs or pulled at his clothing. In a business where only elephants and horses truly count (and all other animals are for colour and ostentation, expendable), Wodebith showed a surprising concern for Greg's depressing collection of chained and cagebound beasts. We grew used to seeing him pet and feed the six-legged sheep, the scale-covered dog and the other freakish creatures that, before his arrival, had been no one's particular task. He was a silent, intense man who loved all animals but who was, stung from some obscure depth, quite funlessly obsessed.

The further reaches of Wodebith's obsession were secret but the foreground was clear enough. He was consumed by the idea of natural remedies. Herbalism was not an act, no performance that he prepared and executed in a few minutes once or twice a day, but the expression of a deeprooted conviction. His story, as we picked it up in bits and scattered hints, reflected something passionate, both a certitude and a conversion.

He had been a flash cutlery salesman around Wellington (vaguely footloose in the period just after the War) with no serious objective beyond his weekly commissions. Then, in a Cuba street pub on a dull day, he had stumbled upon a Hungarian transplant who claimed to have lived with gypsies in Europe, Aborigines in Australia, and to have been adopted into a Maori tribe. He was planning to launch a business selling gypsy herbal cures to the hypochondriac English settlers who were flocking to New Zealand. He needed a partner to help him flog the potions and there, perhaps believing design in the face of luck, appeared Wodebith ready to assume his destiny. At first he sold the herbal cures on consignment, keeping everything over twenty-five in a case of thirty-six for himself. Eventually, Wodebith had gone so far along this road that he began to study medical texts and pharmacopias. When the Hungarian disappeared in advance of a bigamy charge, Wodebith had been able to take over the entire business, reconstructing formulas that had never been written down and inventing others of his own. From that moment he had never looked back. Through a mosaic of bitty anecdotes and

inferences, the story emerged, and was probably true enough. Wodebith had the air, fixed and zealous, of a man who, in mastering something important, had experienced a mindwrenching.

His certainties had become clear swiftly. The day after he drove his clinkershell van onto the tentsite, we learnt that Wodebith refused to eat meat. Black, stringy mutton was Spongecake's stock-in-trade. Sometimes it seemed that it was all he could cook. The day after Wodebith had arrived, the tents were in place once again, and the Big Top was stretched inward from the peg-ring waiting to be raised, when we stopped for lunch. Wodebith, still unknown to most of the hands, walked silently over to the cookhouse. He didn't look at any of us, just methodically stepped over our out-thrust legs. As we sat over our heaped plates, we could hear him demand potatoes and tea, while pointing to the tar-coloured mutton, telling Spongecake to throw the meat in the dustbin. So Wodebith became a focus of aversion. And for his part, he never missed the chance to express his repugnance at eating meat. He ate only vegetables and bread from the cookhouse and bought fruit in the towns.

His herbalism set him apart. Within his crowded van there were hundreds of labelled bottles ready for sale. All of them contained mixtures that he carried with him in tiny enamelled tins. He ground the ingredients in an olivewood mortar, blackgrained and pungent, that we sometimes observed him sniff caressingly. In the long afternoons before performances, he would study his library of frayed books. Probably they were all, like the copy of Culpepper's *Complete Herbal* he allowed me to peek into once, compilations of information about the properties of herbs. Every page had been glossed in a crabbed hand with observations concerning the differences between European and Australasian herbs, substitutions that could be made and availability. Wodebith's mind was nothing, I gathered, if not deliberate. It was a mind for schemes, for diagrams, and for models.

All the bottles in his van bore a label across the top that screamed, in an exaggerated cursive script, the inscription, *Wodebith's Formula*. Below, in a little space that he filled with handprinted letters from a child's printset, came the name of the mixture. One in particular was splashingly called Vi-Tal-K. Sipping a bit of it in an old pannikin he handed me, I thought that I could taste coriander and a fuzzy flavour of something nutty that I knew but could not identify. None of this would have mattered a penny's-worth if Wodebith had not persistently, even compulsively, hawked his remedies within the Circus. Men like Kryptonite, Fisheyes, Sunshine and the other tenthands couldn't be expected to appreciate the benefits of natural herbal compounds. Spongecake

hated him on principle. There were quarrels, but Wodebith seemed to enjoy holding his own. Among the tonguetied tenthands, his words, like nettles, could draw blood.

Even more unsettling to the precarious balance of the Circus, Wodebith never missed an opportunity to make a sale. Standing in front of the freakshow, he would spot someone with a sickly face, a wart, a growth, or a rumbling quinsy, and lure the always-willing sufferer into a conversation focused upon the complaint the symptoms of which he had already noted and assessed. More times than not, the upshot of this exchange would be a cluster of locals gathered close about Wodebith's van during the nightly taking-down, all of them captivated by Wodebith's allure, by secret cures.

The flinty edge of Wodebith's convictions helped to sell his mixtures but it brought him straight up against his boss. One of Greg's inhibiting fears sprang from his distrust of authority: studiously, like a man stepping among snares, he avoided anything that might put him on the windy side of the law. Gnawed by forebodings of his show crippled, or lost entirely, Greg's fear amounted to a continuing funk in the face of local authorities. Collectively, imbued with Greg's own sense of the fragility of his venture, we walked a cool path between temptations. At least we tried to. Only a few weeks before Wodebith's sudden coming, there had been a dust-up between some of the hands and local timbermen in a one-pub town near Taupo. It had cost Greg more than he could afford to pay, but he brooded upon worse disasters. And broken gossip, slivers of a history, most of which had been enacted in Australia, that no one, except Greg himself, fully knew, hinted that far more consequential things had occurred in the past. Greg's worries showed up abruptly, and usually violently. Once when one of the tenthands had whistled at a schoolgirl crossing the lot, Greg had whirled on him in volcanic over-reaction, lashing him with a savage chop to the neck that left him senseless under the up-raised kingpoles. His fear that some unapparent flimflam would bring down upon him the crunch of authority made Greg distrust Wodebith with increasing virulence.

Wodebith not only ignored Greg's warnings but did his best to sell his remedies even during showtime. Greg began to get his back up. And, hands dangling loosely in front, face red-shot, a vein starting from his forehead in a large ridge that rose from eyes to hairline, he could be daunting. Wodebith missed Greg's dislike, and would not hear his warnings, heedless in his intensity. He would scowl through his glasses, and in the evenings he continued to enthrall afflicted locals. In the strong lights of the Circus, reds and greens violently cutting the white brilliance

of the floods, Wodebith's vials would glisten teasingly, like fool's-gold in the lightslashed night.

From Greg's side of the dispute, things looked more chancy by the day. Wodebith (he said) had given him worms. Whenever we stopped long, Wodebith quickly began to acquire a local reputation, sometimes even a following. People sought him out. Occasionally, they were waiting for him on the lot when we arrived. Greg might have booted him at any point but he was prevented by a dilemma sprung from his own conflicting anxieties. He feared brushes with local authorities but he also hated to see anyone leave. There were a great many stops on the circus hierarchy, from Greg's own trapeeze act down to tenthands like Kryptonite, and he liked to see them all safely filled. Wodebith was slightly askew from the hierarchy, standing at a fairly sharp angle to it more often than not, but Greg would want to keep him on. After being impounded or fined out of existence, Greg dreaded running short of cash and being left shorthanded. The two were linked: it was his persistent scarcity of funds that made it impossible to hire sufficient tenthands or to keep them long through the weary chain of work-galled shows.

Wodebith remained. His place in the circus hierarchy was temporarily secure, even if it was only imaginary. Imperturbable, he asserted his calling in the bared teeth of Greg's threats. For a time, in wordy turbulence, the Circus boiled mildly. Then, imperceptibly as a barometer rising, he began to win converts. Gino, the musical clown, bought Vi-Tal-K to give him 'pep' (but we thought of his sluggishly fat wife) and a few of the tenthands quit making gibes. Some even began to take his side in the daily skirmishes with Spongecake. Then one day, the Ding, driving tentpegs, smashed a sledgehammer against the arch of his left foot. Minor as accidents went, the work of setting up the Big Top, though punctuated by the Ding's yells, hardly slowed. Major Fultz hurried over with his first-aid kit but, beyond sprinkling sulfa powder on the purplish bruise and telling him to rest (not a prescription that Greg encouraged for ailing hands), there was little to do.

The Ding's howls soon gave way to moans. By evening, his foot had swollen painfully. He couldn't walk and thin bursts of his slobbering cries disturbed our work. Shortly before the performance began, salt to our curiosity, the Ding was seen sitting under the awning of Wodebith's van, a heavy blanket around his hunched shoulders and his foot sunk in a scruffy yellow tub. Wodebith had brewed a thick, aromatic footbath in which bits of rough cherrybark, and other cuttings that seemed like short lengths of licorice root, or sticks of cinnamon, floated amidst greenish scum.

The Ding had been soaking his foot for more than an hour when Greg, clouded and stiff in anger, bullied out orders for them to get back to work. Over in the Big Top the performance was underway and all the tenthands were needed to carry out the detachable sections of the wild animal cage after the Major's first act. Greg, grasping after an excuse for anger, raged at their bludging. Heels rooted and braced, Wodebith fought back. Someone, he insisted, had to help that poor bugger of a Ding.

Hunched unhappily beneath Wodebith's awning, complaining softly to himself, his foot thrust into the viscous bath, the Ding remained sitting. Bludgers, Greg shouted, whirling, defeated, back toward the Big Top.

The next morning when we shifted, the Ding wore a wet compress made of the same herbal green slop. By the end of the day, soaking whenever he could and wearing a compress otherwise, the Ding's swollen foot began to heal. Limping carefully, he even helped a bit with the taking-down. In a few days the foot was sound enough to walk upon. Wodebith's victory (it was that, all right) was resounding. Most of the Circus began to accept him. The gibing ceased and his vegetarianism, if not forgotten, was now overlooked. In the next few weeks, we all began adding herbs to our tea and sipping Vi-Tal-K before going to sleep. Even Spongecake's ancient mutton fell out of favour.

Scarcely a month after his triumph, Wodebith's end came as unexpectedly as his arrival. It was early on the second afternoon of a two-day stand near Whangarei. I had been down the road hoisting a few handles with Whale Cock and, as we returned, I felt comfortably inattentive in the afternoon's heat and sea-breezes. As we walked up the midway, turning in between the Big Top and the bending line of caravans and trucks, Wodebith suddenly burst through the door of Greg's posh white Airflow. For an instant he seemed to hang there beneath the lolly-striped awning, holding the frame of his glasses with his left hand while the right was bent behind his back. One leg was raised as if he were uncertain what he should do next. Then, the swing of motion continuing, he lurched forward, his greyflecked head tipped abruptly down, down over Greg's birdcages still touching his glasses. His green shirt caught the air and he thudded to earth in front of the cages. Flushed, and doubled at the waist like a fighter, Greg filled the door. Not a word had been spoken.

Wodebith got up, went to his little pod-like van (the garish colours had become, in the succession of lots, deadened with dust), picked up some cages, took the awning down, and drove away. For an instant Greg had

watched him limping off, still clutching his glasses, then he had slammed the door. I had never seen a more silent eruption of frenzy. Whale Cock stood unspeaking beside me, his head nodding mechanically. My God, I thought, Wodebith has had his hand in the till.

He hadn't. Greg had warned him for the last time about flogging his herbal chunder (there was Greg's style, in a word) and Wodebith, stung by his relentless bee, had tried to argue the point, even to convince him, too, of the virtues tightwound in those secret mixtures. Perhaps his popularity had turned his head or, more likely, it had turned Greg's. The result was the same. Wodebith had confronted Greg with all of his unshatterable certainty and Greg, never more than a thin edge from savagery, had gone crook.

During tea, no one commented on the meat. Spongecake, warped and blackened teeth showing his smile, looked happier than I had seen him in weeks.

Six years later I was listening to Wodebith in Albert Park. And, like weathered thorns, his convictions had lost none of their sharpness. He addressed his straggly, only half-engaged audience unaffected by its resistance. It seemed unbelievable, but Wodebith's speech became clear: in turgid Auckland's clear December, a myth of cosmic birth was emerging yet once more, newly forged, as ancient as Magdelanian caves, from one more out-reaching, in-bending mind.

At some moment in the remote past (he was arguing), but according with the dawn of time, there had been a kernel of light surrounded by darkness. That, I realized, was the significance of the wire cage that Wodebith held before him or above his head. The cage was cone-shaped and there were bits of shiny foil stuck to the intersections of the wires. The tip of the cone was the original, indestructible lightpoint in Nothingness, while the bits of foil seemed to represent the temporal flow of light-spoor. The cage was a model, a crude cosmological model of the universe as Wodebith understood it. It was a diagram of his thought and bore the mindprint of his obsessions. However conceptually raw, it was a striking act of imaginative abstraction for the herbalist to have made. He waved the cone toward his audience, the foil-sparkling tip jabbing forward. The history of the universe hung in that swift movement. Germinating, the original lightkernel had rested and then had begun to split, like a fertilized seed. And slowly the engulfed seeds had begun to sprout and fill the blank nothingness. The process had continued right up to the present hour with light spreading and conquering darkness. Mythically (like Bruno in the maw of formalism), Wodebith seemed to bloom with the primacy of light.

In the snarl of disbelief, indifference and ridicule (as I had once seen him defend the hunched figure of the Ding), he struggled with obscurity. Human consciousness was light enclosed within darkness. Pressed in, it was nonetheless capable of bursting, like a sprout from its pod, through the lightless rind to which it was bound. Men, Wodebith was shouting (the wire frame held constantly above his head now), should seek out those other kinds of existence that embody light, or the most light, and by absorbing affinities strengthen themselves.

Only the notion of affinities sounded familiar. It recalled the herbalism that Wodebith had briefly urged in his season with Epperson's Circus. The rest was very different. Cosmology was in the forefront, not herbalism. It seemed impossible to tell which had come first: his account of the lightkernel's growth might have sprung from his original herbalism, or the herbalism might have simply withered into its metaphysical ground. Before me, in either case, was the unchanged link. Insistent, arrogant in mind's scope, Wodebith held constant.

By the time Wodebith had reached his exposition of 'affinities', many of the little group had become abusive. Under Sir George's statesman-like stare, rude words were hurled. Some of the young men, students from the University, their blue eyes laughing analytically, called out insults and questions without answers ('Say, Philosopher, do we defecate our affinities?') to guy him. There were faces flushed darkly, iron-red with hilarity. Wodebith was riding above the mockery of his audience, purposeful and stonily indifferent. If only he had more time, it struck me, he could win them over just as, years before, he had won the circus-folk.

The incredible cosmology, the primitive wire model, all Wodebith's mad spiel, were yoked by a process of growth, consistent though quite insane, to his earlier herbalism. I saw that by his own efforts alone Wodebith had leapt the chasm between practice and theory. He had shaped a metaphysical theory that could defend, or even prove, his herbalism, and he had done so without reference to, or even an inkling of, three thousand years of human speculation. Thought by hard-won thought, he had found himself compelled to discover abstractions. Like old Anaximander, or like all those island-skipping, toga-clad philosophers, Wodebith had been driven by intellectual need, even while constricted by his lack of knowledge, to struggle beyond his empiricism. Mind's restless energy had urged him lightwards.